# TRANSCRIPT—VIVIAN GAIL SIMPSON

**Interviewee:** Vivian Gail Simpson

**Interviewer:** Joe Newman

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**Transcriber:** Alice Helms

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Joe Newman: My name is Joe Newman and I am here interviewing a graduate of Allen High School and for the record, would you tell us your name?

Vivian Gail Simpson: Vivian Gail Simpson. I'm better known as V. Gail Simpson in my new role.

JN: V. Gail?

VGS: V. Gail. It depends on where I was and what I was doing as to who called me what at the time, and I typically go by Gail. My mother named me Gail and my grandmother named me Vivian as a family name.

JN: And when were you born?

VGS: 1950. May 15th.

JN: She and I chatted a little bit earlier and I'm three years ahead of her. I was in the 1965 high school graduating class in the Atlanta area. Where were you born?

VGS: I was born here in Asheville, in the Colored People's Hospital. There was such a thing at that time.

JN: That was the official name?

VGS: That was the official name.

JN: And where do you live now?

VGS: I live in Southfield, Oakland County, Michigan.

JN: I'm glad you came down for this reunion.

VGS: Oh, I wouldn't miss it.

JN: Where did you live when you attended Allen High School?

VGS: I lived here in Asheville. As a matter of fact I grew up on Water Street. W-A-T-E-R Street here in town. For my early years we lived on McDowell Street and that's all developed into the medical center and all of that. It used to be an apartment complex, just as you come out of the tunnel. We lived there until about 1962, I believe, and moved to Water Street.

JN: Is Water Street down in what they call the River Arts District now?

VGS: I've been away for so long, I'm not sure what's called what anymore, but I know the River District is like Depot Street? So Water Street is just north of there.

JN: That same area. Tell us a little bit about your educational background, just a summary of the schools you went to while you were growing up here in Asheville.

VGS: Well, my first elementary school days were at Shiloh Elementary School. I'm sure you've heard of that. There was a lot of history there. I'm a military baby. My dad was in the Navy and Mom of course was the primary caretaker so she was from Arden, that's where her family originated from and so she was aware of Shiloh School because she went to Shiloh before she went to Stephens-Lee High School, so that's the connection there. A lot of my classmates from elementary school, we all went to Shiloh Elementary. In eighth grade, that's when we finished that school and I went to Allen School.

JN: For nine through twelve.

VGS: Actually I finished at South French Broad. I went to Allen School because that's legacy. I had aunties and cousins who all went to Allen School and so my mother was merely following the tradition. I have a sister and a brother and the expectation was that we would follow the tradition for that legacy. You know growing up, you're young, you say, 'Please, I want to go to that school with my other friends who live on the street who go to the public school.' You wear your parents down and then you end up going where you want to go. I did enjoy that year at Allen but I felt like I wasn't making the same friendships I had otherwise. But it was a good year for me, I made lots of friends who I still stand tough with today. They're scattered all over the country and I remember Mrs. Burton, she was our Home Economics teacher. You know they don't teach that anymore but she taught us how to cook and how to sew and of course, Mother taught us how to do those things too, because that's something that she learned along the way. Those were some exciting years, we studied hard and I'm a nerd because I love reading and studying and learning, so that was a good place for me to be. My older cousins went to Allen and

they actually graduated from Allen. They used to tell me their stories and the friendships and the relationships that you make.

JN: So you had one year at Allen and then went to South French Broad. Was there a big difference in the school climate, atmosphere? And how would you describe that?

VGS: Oh, yes. I always felt like kind of the outsider because I didn't start with my class at South French Broad, so I kind of had to make my way in. My two best friends lived on my street, they were a year ahead of me in high school so I had to go in as the new kid on the block and you know new kids get treated a little differently. So in terms of class placement, what grade, the placement, they had some levels, you were an A student, a B student. I just got thrown in and so finally I made my way and I said, 'You know, I'm an A student, I performed when I was at Allen, I performed when I was in elementary school, I want to be with all the A students.' And so eventually I was placed with the A students and you work at it but—.

JN: That sounds like a real decision point for you.

VGS: Oh it was, it was, and so then I began to make friends and I have a very special friend that I lost contact with. We were in the top in our class in terms of graduation, so I don't know where she is and I'm disappointed that she's not going to be here as part of the fiftieth reunion. Anyway, I found my way to South French Broad which had become integrated, i.e. the teachers, never the students. It was considered an all black high school but what Asheville considered integration was we'll mix the teachers and to me that was not real integration. At that age I knew the difference in what the expectation was around

integration. I think eventually, after I had graduated, they made the school into a junior high school and then the students went to Asheville High School.

JN: Yes. In the fall of 1969.

VGS: My sister was a product of Asheville High School, although she went in the eighth grade to South French Broad but when they switched the schools up she went to Asheville High School. Now that was an integrated school. And then many of many special friends who I went to elementary school with got scattered throughout the county. They didn't follow to South French Broad or to Allen, they were scattered throughout the county schools.

JN: Was there a lot of talk among you and your friends about the desegregation process that was coming and how it would affect you and your family?

VGS: Oh, absolutely.

JN: That was a big issue.

VGS: That was a big issue. Growing up in my family—my father was a Baptist minister here in town—.

JN: Which one of the churches?

VGS: The last church he pastored was in Swannanoa, New Salem Baptist in Swannanoa but he was in West Asheville at Mount Carmel and then he did some pastoring further out in Waynesville and out toward that way. I remember some of those little towns because we would have to get in the car and go. My dad never met a stranger and he knew

everybody all over the world, trust me, he knew people. But in terms of the whole segregation/integration, those were things that were talked about at our house. As a child I can remember my grandmother who lived in Arden—that's where my momma comes from—my grandmother talking about her desire to see the races come together, so that was always something that was taught to us because she lived out in the country so all her neighbors around her were white. She lived on a big farm out in the Arden area—you get me to talking and I don't stop. In my other life I'm a genealogist so I love talking history and family and that sort of thing. Grandmother always taught us those values and we understood what integration and segregation was, we understood what equality and inequality was, we understood who the Klan were, we may not walk up to you and say, 'Oh, that's a ( ),' what we knew and we understood. In our family, hate was not something that was taught. Our values from our family have always meant education, education, education. Martin Luther King had a dream and our family, our parents wanted us to have a dream and wanted us to do better in life than they had done. And so education was always to be pursued. So I have a sister and a brother and all of us are college educated.

JN: Where did you go to college?

VGS: I went to Johnson C. Smith in Charlotte, North Carolina. A legacy again, Mom went to Johnson C. Smith and then I left Charlotte after several years and went to Michigan to get a graduate degree, accomplished that and never came back. It's been an amazing ride. I would come back to visit because Mom still lived here. Dad passed away many years ago and Mom more recently and I would come to visit. I still have some

relatives in town, some first cousins that I stay in touch with and when I come through here I stop and get a meal or a sleepover or something. You know what, I tell everybody all the time about the mountains, there is nothing as beautiful as the Blue Ridge Mountains, nothing in the world, and I traveled. There is nothing in the world as beautiful as the Blue Ridge Mountains.

JN: Some of the views we have from the city will just knock you out.

VGS: When I come across the Smokies—I found a place to stop before I hit the mountains so I can get some pictures. When you get ready to go up that mountain you can see the mountain range and I thought, 'Okay, let me pull over here for my pictures.' I always have to have something to take back with me. There's just nothing as magnificent as the Blue Ridge Mountains. Trust me.

JN: I totally agree with that.

Zoe Rhine:Did you say what your degree was? Your graduate degree?

VGS: Social Work.

JN: And your undergrad was?

VGS: Sociology and Social Work. At the time that I was at Johnson C. Smith, they had not gotten an accredited Social Work program so they had Social Welfare and Sociology. But my intent was never to become a Social Worker, I was going into Law. Law was something that I was really passionate about, so like History and Poli Sci and Sociology. And my Sociology instructors kept pulling me and pulling me and pulling me in. And I

said, 'Okay, I can still do Law with this degree.' And my passion at that time, because we had—it was 1968, 1967-1968—we had a lot of African-American girls, young women, going to prison and I just thought that some of those folks were in prison unjustly. I'm passionate about social justice and so I wanted to become a Lawyer because I was going to be the one to go back and look at their case situation and see—there's some innocent people in jail, lots of them—and so I'm going to be the one. But anyway, I worked for a while in Charlotte after I finished Johnson C. Smith, and decided that I needed to get my Master's Degree. Let me tell you, ( ) I don't regret any ( ) because I had some wonderful mentors along the way. After working for a while in the mental health field with children—I love children—I went to get that Master's Degree in Social Work. Never did I intend to stay in Michigan, that godforsaken cold country, but here I am today. And I often come back and my intent was to go to UNC Chapel Hill. They had a whole program that you could go and work at the same time. But they kept putting me on a waitlist, waitlist, waitlist. And one of my best girlfriends in Charlotte got in and I said, 'It has to do with my last name, you know, the S's, down at the bottom of the alphabet.' So I decided that, one of my mentors decided, 'Let's get you enrolled in the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.' I was going to go Illinois and she said, 'No, you won't last out there in that cornfield.' That's what she told me and she was right. So I went to University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and it was an experience. It was an experience. And so I've been working and I retired a year and a half ago from my Social Work career but other folks don't think I retired because they keep coming ( ) with something, you know? So in my middle life, I'm traveling. I own a travel agency. It's wonderful. I'm an educator. I teach part-time in one of the community colleges. So I'm not really retired but

you know that day job from nine to five, I'm retired from that. The experience has been good. I could go on and on.

JN: You have a real social awareness that not everybody has, whether black or white, let me ask you another question, did your background in segregated schools prepare you for the University of Michigan graduate program? I guess you could talk about social preparation as well as academic preparation.

VGS: Let me tell you. Yes and no. At Johnson C. Smith, a historically black college, there were some white instructors and other administrative folks. When I was there, there were no white students at this historically black college. White students coming in is a new phenomena well after I left. So coming from that environment, and it wasn't about—because in my work after leaving Johnson C. Smith, I worked in integrated important situations so that wasn't a new thing for me, I was always maybe one of two African-Americans in that situation. Let me back up for just a minute because at sixteen years old I had my first job, at Southern Bell, right here in Asheville, North Carolina. There was just a handful of African-Americans in that environment at that time. Just a handful. The friends that I made were white and so again, Grandmother pushed that for us, she said, 'You live and you ( ) and you share and you develop relationships with all people. It doesn't matter what your color is of your complexion.' But, coming out of Johnson C. Smith and going to University of Michigan Ann Arbor, now that was an eye opener, truly an eye opener. My thought was, 'I'm going to Michigan and I'm going to Ann Arbor and what better place for you to experience integration than it is right there on that campus.' But guess what, that wasn't the case. When I got there it was like culture shock because it

was predominantly white and while there were supports in place for students who were not of the general population, it wasn't the same. You had so much prejudice from some of those instructors. I said, 'My Lord, what is going on here? I'm in a professional social work graduate program, and you've got folks like this? Teaching? With these kind of attitudes? There's something wrong with this picture.' And I remember one person. I had gotten a special grant because I worked with children. I had gotten a special grant and the grant was going to be discontinued so I was informed and I went to the business office there at the School of Social Work to find out what I could do to finish out my last year and so the Dean had a conversation with me that just—to this day I will never forget when he said, 'You have no business being here in the first place.' I said, 'What do you mean by that?' 'You have no business being here in the first place.' I still to this day don't know what that meant. I got up and packed up my stuff and got out of his office. I was just totally offended. So I went down the hall—.

JN: Was this after you had completed the program?

VGS: I had completed the first year. I still had the second year to go. It was a sixteen month program. I was six or seven hundred miles away from home and—. So I went down the hall to one of my professors and I said, 'Did you know that they have terminated the grant, the government isn't going to sponsor this program anymore and I'm concerned how—do I need to go to the dorm and pack up to go somewhere else? If you could have heard the Dean and the conversation he just had with me, I just felt really like he was being racist.' I don't say that lightly. Folks know me, I call it as I see it and I'm not going to call you that unless you give me reason to, because that's a powerful

word. So he said, ‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.’ So I don’t know what he did but he found some funds somewhere and I never went back to the Dean’s office. When I graduated I thought it was important to go to the Dean’s office and say, ‘Now you said I didn’t belong here.’ I won’t say what I said at first. But, it was a real culture shock in terms of matriculating not just the School of Social Work but you got the whole campus to deal with in terms of figuring things out. Johnson C. Smith’s campus, you could sit on that campus several times over. When I was able to learn where to go for resources, for research and study and who I wanted to be a mentor to me, I got involved in the curriculum committee, I participated as a student and I used my voice. Obviously I used my voice, you can probably tell that. I saw how to make a difference for other students through that process and I wanted it to be documented and so that’s why I did it.

JN: Did you have a family as well? Marriage and children?

VGS: No, no children. I adopted everybody else’s. I have a couple of godchildren that I love dearly.

JN: So you’re a career woman.

VGS: That’s right.

JN: You are an exceptional person to interview because most of the people we’re talking to today are people who did not go to Allen for instance and who came up through the Asheville Public Schools, were in that class of sixty-eight, and graduated from South French Broad High School. But your background and I think your social awareness make you—I couldn’t have found a better person to interview. Before we wrap things up, do

you understand the project? These are teachers who were there the last year of Stephens-Lee. This is from the 1964 yearbook. Do you want to—?

VGS: So none of these were really—. My mother graduated Stephens-Lee. The principal over here, what's his name?

JN: Mr. Belton?

VGS: Yes, Mr. Belton. And as a matter of fact, six degrees of separation, let me tell you. Mr. Belton—one of my sorority sisters in Michigan, her family comes out of North Carolina, the eastern part of the state.

JN: He went to Johnson C. Smith too.

VGS: But I didn't know all of this as a youngster until I met her. I kept saying, 'Belton,' and her name and so forth but I didn't know they were related. They're brothers or something in there. Here, Mr. Burton. Now Mrs. Burton, his wife, was—.

JN: There are two different Burtons.

VGS: Isn't that Lonnie Burton up there?

JN: That's Lonnie. And that's Frieda next to him.

VGS: Not her, his wife. She was my Home Economics teacher at Allen. She was also the Home Economics teacher for my older cousin. So that tells you, they were pretty aged—. Mr. Cape, Mr. Belton, have some relationships with the young lady I was mentioning to you in Michigan. They got some Beltons and Capes ( ). Let's see. That's Mr. Cowan. Mr.

Cowan was never my teacher. His wife was my music teacher, my mother had us take piano lessons ( ). The Cowan family, there was several Cowans I recall growing up. Mrs. Forney—.

JN: She is someone a lot of students remember. I think she would have loved you because of your social awareness. She was a Sociology and History teacher and a strong advocate, we understand, of making integration work. When she got to Asheville High School and it appeared that things were not going well—.

(*Note: The last few minutes of the interview are spent walking and talking through an exhibit and the sound is too poor to transcribe.*)

JN: I want to thank you for your time and for telling some wonderful stories and telling us a lot about yourself and about your memories of education, not just in Asheville, but in Ann Arbor as well. It's my pleasure to meet you.

VGS: This has been a pleasure. Thank you, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.